Writing as Resistance: A Study of Wilde’s De Profundis and Aurobindo’s Tales of Prison Life

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Prison writing, a literary genre in itself, has often been considered as an act of political resistance. Oscar Wilde and Sri Aurobindo though belonging to different countries were implicated by the same power, that of Imperial England, but were incarcerated for various reasons. Wilde was imprisoned for his outrageous behavior of openly exhibiting his gay sexuality while his Indian counterpart was sentenced for his supposed involvement in a political conspiracy against the British Raj. Another marked difference between the two literary pieces is that De Profundis was penned by Wilde during his tenure in the Reading Gaol whereas Tales of prison life was born after Aurobindo’s release from the Alipore Jail. However, as creative writers, the two men refused to succumb to the external power that was bent upon destroying them both physically and mentally, rather they turned inward into their being indulging in a sole-searching spiritual exercise. That which started off as writing resistance, ultimately led the two men towards the sublime heights of wholesome transformation and realization of the Godhead, from whence they drew their inner strength. Both Oscar Wilde as well as Aurobindo were meted out the severest of punishment, that of solitary confinement capable of breaking up the spirit of a person due to mental isolation, lack of light, lack of proper food and water, including lack of human company. This study is an attempt to offer the range and width of the nature of their experience and expression in the solitary cell which urged them towards writing, a means that enables to resist and subvert power from within.

Sri Aurobindo wrote his Tales of Prison Life in retrospect, so that he has been able to envisage the greater purpose of his prison life and therefore begins his essays saying, that in spite of being confined for a whole year in a solitary cell with no human connection, almost like a caged animal-

And when I would re-enter the world of activity it would not be the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose. Rather it would be a new being, a new character, intellect, life, mind, embarking upon a new course of action that would come out of the ashram at Alipore… It would have been more appropriate to speak of a year’s living in a forest, in an ashram or hermitage … The only result of the wrath of the British Government was that I found God. (1-2)

To Aurobindo, then, after only a short period of a wavering mind that questioned the reason for his worldly sufferings, the larger purpose of Vasudeva is revealed to his more mature mind. For Wilde, on the other hand, suffering is dreadful, immobile and paralyzing. It is characterized by infinity contributing to a sickening situation –
With us, prison makes a man a pariah. I, and such as I am, have hardly any right to air and sun...To revisit the glimpses of the moon is not for us. Our very children are taken away. Those lovely links with humanity are broken. We are doomed to be solitary... 
(De Profundis)

Both Men make reference to their noble birth, though Wilde confesses with candour that he himself was responsible for his downfall, that he ruined his position in the world as a symbol of the art and culture of his age. He is remorseful right from the beginning of his essay thereby seeking refuge in humility. He who was acknowledged as ‘the lord of language’ writes –

What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character...I ceased to be lord over myself...I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. 
(De Profundis)

Solitary confinement has not turned him insane, but to confess with astonishing frankness the hidden truths about his wayward life and thereafter to accept and acknowledge that to surrender in humility to the infinite Christ is the means to defend himself against the Crown and also the feeling of bitterness against the world. When suffering renders an ordinary man helpless that drives him to understand life itself as meaningless, realization dawns on Wilde that even his suffering is not without meaning. That the last hidden quality of his nature remains to be humility is a means to the treasure that urges him towards self-discovery, ‘the starting point for a fresh development’. He concedes that this realization has come at the most appropriate moment in his life as he says, “It could not have come before, nor later... one cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it” 
(De Profundis).

Sri Aurobindo expresses a similar feeling when he writes about the rude sense of deprivation that was thrust on him by the British Government.

But hereby bound to the wheels of an iron law, subservient to the whim of others, one had to live deprived of every other contact. According to the proverb, one who can stand solitude is either a god or brute, it is a discipline quite beyond the power of men. 
(Tales of Prison Life 40)

He realizes that god was teaching him a few lessons. One was to make him understand the state of mind in which prisoners condemned to solitary cells are forced
towards insanity, and therefore to reform the prison system towards humane approach. The second lesson that Aurobindo was to learn would be to attain mental poise that would remain unperturbed even for twenty years of solitude. And the last most important purpose was to make him realize that “complete self-surrender (Atma – Samarpana)” would lead to perfection and realization of the Lord. From then on, Aurobindo remained untouched by the sorrows of solitary imprisonment, as he points out, “The sufferings seemed as fragile as water drops on a lotus leaf” (*Tales of Prison Life* 43). He therefore firmly believes that God has deliberately brought about such a situation or experience that in turn transforms him through the extraordinary power of prayer.

For sometime Wilde wallows in self-pity arriving at the conclusion that his is a lost battle, as there is no religion that might come to his help. He professes that he would rather commence a new creed –the ‘confraternity of the faithless’. He is dejected because reason or logic too does not help him. Wilde gradually allows acceptance of change and contemplates on the ‘ethical evolution of character’. He writes,

I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakrum till one’s fingertips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes … the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame-each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into spiritualizing of the soul. (*De Profundis*)

He mentions casually about the two great turning points in his life. One, when his father sent him to oxford, which brought him glory and fame in the literary world and the next was when he is sent to prison, where he learns the lesson of suffering which is no more a mystery as preached by clergymen but rather a revelation. Sorrow, according to him is the supreme emotion that man is capable of; for it is only in suffering that the soul of man could attain perfection. He begins the day by going on his knees and washing the floor of his cell. For sometime prison life with its ‘endless privations and restrictions’ had made him rebellious. Rather than break his heart, it turns his heart into a stone. He soon realizes that “the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven” (*De Profundis*). In the passing phases of his life he had tasted every kind of pleasure –“I threw the pearls of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I live on honey comb”. But just as he had tasted one kind of pleasure, he had to taste the other half of the secrets that the garden of life had to offer. At this juncture, he sees an
intimate and immediate connection between the life of Christ and the life of the artist. He learns the lesson that it is sorrow that abides forever.

In talking of Christ, Wilde discusses at length on the sympathy and the nobility of carrying on His shoulders the sufferings of others as His own. In his Christ like acceptance of all his sufferings, Wilde in a humbled state, is able to perceive the soul, or the divine spirit in every other aspect of life. Sri Aurobindo’s troubled mental listlessness caused him agony but in repeatedly reciting the mantras of the Upanishads sees god in every form. Just as Wilde as an artist observes or even searches for a mode of existence in which ‘soul and body are one and indivisible’ (De Profundis), and suggests of “a spirit dwelling in external things and making its raiment of earth and air”, so does Aurobindo impose the idea of Brahma on all things he perceives –

Men, cows, ants, birds are moving, flying, singing, speaking, yet all is Nature’s Play, behind all this is a great pure detached spirit rapt in a serene delight… it seemed God himself was standing under the tree, to play upon his lute of Delight…The manifestation of these emotions overpowered my whole body and mind… The hard cover of my life opened up and a spring of love for all creatures gushed from within…(Tales of Prison Life 43)

Unlike Wilde, Aurobindo describes in detail the court proceedings of his trial, of the witnesses, of the behaviour and attitude of the police, the magistrate and the lawyers; He remains unperturbed throughout the entire trial because of his faith in god with the understanding that he was brought into the prison house only for his own good. At one instance, he humorously draws comparisons from literature to describe the conduct of the case, -“Just as Holinshed and Plutarch had collected the material for Shakespeare’s historical plays, and in the same manner the police had collected the material for this drama of a case. And Mr. Norton happened to be the Shakespeare of this play” (55). In looking at the entire situation with detachment, Aurobindo saves himself of the mental trauma that otherwise would have destroyed his spirit. In other words, Aurobindo took refuge in the humorous free play of his creative imagination. In recollecting his prison life, Aurobindo points out to the strange fact that in spite of the hardship that he underwent; he does not feel anger or sorrow but laughter. The thought about the odd prison uniform, the manner of treating him and his companions like thieves or murderers, “to keep them like animals in a cage, to give them food unfit for animals, to make them endure…thirst and hunger, sun, rain, cold…but … I was not annoyed” (Tales of Prison Life 21). Whereas Wilde’s writing involve more of self-introspection into his own person, however, he too expresses the desire to reform the prison system like Aurobindo – “The prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to alter it when I go out” (De Profundis). At the same time, like Aurobindo, Wilde too does not fail to recognize the spirit of humanity that pervades
among other prisoners and prison officials, well beyond the totalitarian regime of the prison system. Both men do express similar feelings about this positive aspect of humanity, that prevent them from hating or carrying bitterness in their hearts once they are released from prison.

Like Wilde, Aurobindo too lays emphasis on self surrender – “There cannot be complete freedom unless we surrender ourselves to God, being fully free from desire and giving up egoism” (Tales of Prison Life 15). To take refuge in god has been his motto. His gradual submission to god gave him the right kind of vision. While Wilde’s thoughts are more oriented towards the meaning of the life of Christ and its relation to that of the artist and art as such, Aurobindo orients his yogic and spiritual expertise toward the freedom of his country along with its people. With Aurobindo’s yogic bent of mind, given his cultural background and spiritual training, he visualizes Vasudeva in a vivid and forceful expression. The high walls of the prison symbolized for him the presence of god’s abode. He describes his experience in such a way –

I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding me his shade. I looked at the bars of my cell,… It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my friend and lover… I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I look at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened soul and misused bodies (Tales of Prison Life, 11-12).

In the beginning the agnostic and atheist in him ruled over him. But after his solitary confinement, trials and tribulations, Sri Aurbindo realizes Vasudeva who answers his doubts, doubts and questions of an agnostic and skeptic. In his one year of seclusion, Aurobindo obtained Spiritual enlightenment. He realized the supreme cosmic God had in all His splendour and beauty. He emerges as an enlightened yogi, acquiring a deeper perception of life and experience, enhanced by a spiritual understanding of things.

Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, probes into the significance of pain and sorrow, and after much deliberation chances upon Christ, the supreme example to be followed both in life and art. An atheist like Aurobindo, in his early years, Wilde gradually comes to understand about the power of love, of which Christ is the message. Once he understands that love and sorrow are two sides of the same God his attitude towards life and suffering changes. He has his mystic vision of Christ which he obtains after a conscious effort and constant striving. His mental development and evolution of character is a gradual process that inspired him to create De Profundis,
which served to re-establish his eminent position as an artist. He happened to find his lost glory. The intense beauty and the music of the words, the poetic imagery, and the flowery language of this prison composition, are all witness to his potential as an artist with true aesthetic sense.

Suffering, to both these writers, appears to be a mode of attaining perfection in one’s life. Wilde in *De Profundis* and Aurobindo in *Tales of Prison Life*, both refer to the context where Christ takes children as examples for their elders to follow. It is interesting to note that the two men concede that children are closer to the kingdom of God. Wilde expresses his desire to write on two subjects one is Christ as the precursor of the romantic expression in life, the other is the artistic life considered in its relation to conduct. In His attitude to life, to people, to sorrow, to morality and in His capacity for love, Christ is made a romantic. Wilde writes that there is something unique about Christ and that he is an exception—“He is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something” (*De Profundis*). Wilde sincerely hopes that his art in the future will be set on a deeper note, of greater unity of passion and directness of impulse. As he says, “not width but intensity is the true aim of modern art”. Wilde Aurobindo leave the prison a much enlightened man, Wilde is reconciled to his situation, accepts his sufferings as part of the purging up of his soul. Christ has made him realize that the spirit alone was of value. In all humility he concludes that it is only by going to prison he has understood the values of the soul, the qualities of love and suffering that can shape the spirit of man to perfection. He submits himself to nature towards the end, writing, “Nature whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide… she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole” (*De Profundis*).

Both Aurobindo and Oscar Wilde in their creativity have enjoyed absolute freedom of the mind, show resistance that with the help of imagination overcomes the claustrophobic and confining nature of the prison cell. They were able to wield the power of the pen over the power of law that judged and punished. Prison writing has awakened their souls to a deeper faith, both in man as well as in the Divine. The art of writing itself has helped them to get rid of the overwhelming despair and agony of being confined within four walls. Though physically incapacitated, their minds draw strength from their inner being with the help of its awakening to the vision of God. Their minds refuse to cow down to the imperial power, to the pain and humiliation inflicted upon their selves as is apparent from the references made by the two men to the prevailing conditions of the prison, they, however, emerge benefited in spirit and love through their writings. In constructing the history of the British system of punishment, they have inadvertently recorded their own version of the gross misuse of power of those in authority, from their own personal experience. Writing comes to their rescue, and unlike the other prisoners, Wilde and Aurobindo resist authority from
within in terms of writing, which is at once a source of liberation of the spirit as well as resistance of power.

Works Cited: